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ABSTRACT

This report describes a project that used children's literature to introduce 6- and 7-year-old children (n=25) in the United States to other languages to arouse their interest in finding out more about language. Most of the children were monolingual and spoke English; two boys spoke some Spanish. The study was conducted to see if young children's awareness about languages could be raised by their examination of children's books written in several different foreign languages, several of which were similar to stories that the children had read in English. The children were grouped into groups of 4 or 5 for about 45 minutes; each group met to look at the books on four separate occasions. The children were fascinated with the books and were quick to pick out similarities and differences in the print; they were curious, perceptive, and eager to talk about the languages. Findings demonstrate that children's literature can be one meaningful way to introduce young children to other cultures and languages while, at the same time, raising their awareness of their own first language. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/NAV)

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EXPLORING LANGUAGE THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of children's literature to introduce children to other languages and to arouse their interest in finding out more about language. It was conducted in the United States with twenty-five six and seven year olds. Most of the children were monolingual and spoke English. Two of the boys spoke some Spanish. The study was conducted to see if young children's awareness about languages could be raised by examining foreign languages. Children's literature books written in several different languages were selected. Several of the stories written in a foreign language were similar to versions that the children had seen written in English.

The author worked with children in small groups of four or five for about forty-five minutes. Each group met to look at books on four separate occasions. The children were fascinated with the books and were quick to pick out similarities and differences in the print. They were curious and perceptive and eager to talk about the languages. This study seems to show that children's literature can be one meaningful way to introduce young children to other cultures and languages and to raise their awareness of their first language.

Key Words for Indexing:

Multicultural literature
Bilingualism
Culture
Language awareness
Young children

EXPLORING LANGUAGE THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

Children's literature, both fiction and nonfiction, has become very popular in the educational setting. In the classroom teachers are using "real books" to supplement or replace primers for teaching reading and writing as well as for teaching in content areas across the curriculum. One type of literature that has become more widely available is multicultural. Multicultural books are usually fiction but, they may be based on factual information, and they usually strive to give a picture of a specific culture or group of people. Some of the books being published are adaptations of folk tales from different countries. Many of these stories are translated into English, but some are presented in a bilingual format. This enables children to learn something about the language of the country of origin of these stories.

Educators are beginning to use multicultural books in a variety of ways. In this piece of action research, the author investigates using multicultural literature to raise children's awareness of other languages and cultures. The author is also interested in discovering what children can learn about language in general by examining text in a foreign language. Studies have shown that children learn language best in a natural setting where they have opportunities to explore and experiment with language (Bain, Fitzgerald and Taylor, 1992; Fisher, 1991; and Goodman, 1986). Children's literature can provide a natural way

for children to examine languages in an enjoyable and non-threatening environment.

This study was conducted to determine what children could learn about language and culture by systematically examining books about other cultures, some of which were written in a foreign language. The author worked with second graders (seven year olds) in a school in the United States. Children were divided into groups of four or five. The author met with the children on four separate occasions and spent about forty minutes with each group. Books in several different languages with diverse writing patterns were chosen. This enabled the author to expose children to different print and writing styles and to raise their awareness to language. Children were asked to examine print, attend to details, and to compare and contrast print and content. For example, the children were encouraged to notice similarities and differences between their first language and that of the foreign text.

It was a learning experience for both the author and the children. The children discovered many important things through observing the print, format, and illustrations. They were able to pick out similarities and differences in the print and began comparing the languages. They attempted to read some of the words, which led to a discussion on pronunciation. They examined the various of types of print used. They also began to see ways in which other folktales and legends they had read were the same as, or different than the stories we were examining. The children

noticed the use of illustrations to enhance and aid in story telling.

Children's Responses

The second graders in the study had just completed a unit on American folk tales, and they saw this as an extension of that study. They were very curious about the idea of stories written in different languages. English was the mother tongue for all of the children and most of them had not heard a foreign language. Only two of the children said they had heard Chinese in China Town when they visited San Francisco and one boy had learned some Spanish while living in Mexico for a year.

The first book used with the children was a Bulgarian version of Thumbelina. Bulgarian uses the Cyrillic alphabet so many of the letters are similar but not quite the same, while some are very different from any letters that the children have seen before. The children made several discoveries when we used the book. Looking at the print they quickly picked out a few similarities and differences. John said "that's an upside down 'U' and there's a backward 'R.'" Susan wanted to compare the English and Bulgarian letters. The author gave her a copy of the Cyrillic alphabet and Susan proceeded to point out some of the similarities and differences in letter direction. Several children noticed that some of the letters look like mirror images of those in English. Some of the children were interested in learning to write their own name using the Cyrillic alphabet.

The students then became interested in the illustrations. They had been reading stories about "The Littles" and one of them made the connection between the thumb-sized girl and the stories they had read. As we looked at the illustration of Thumbelina and the frog, Janet said "I know, it's Thumbelina!" She had read the English version of the story and recognized some of the similarities in the illustrations. They particularly enjoyed the detailed illustrations of the characters. The pictures allowed them to tell the story. The children also examined the Bulgarian language and the written format. They even noticed that the sentences were shorter at the top of the page and got longer toward the bottom. One child said "That's the opposite of what we do in our books."

Next we looked at a Czech fairy tale called Jablicko, which means Little Apple. The story is about a girl who falls asleep under the apple tree and in her dream she follows an apple through the forest. She sees many of the fairy tale characters. The illustrations in this tale depict a variety of familiar fairy tales including Puss in Boots, The Little Mermaid, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and several others. The children eagerly looked for pictures that they could identify. "There's Snow White and the seven dwarfs." "I see the gingerbread house." "There's the wicked witch." They were also interested in the pictures that they couldn't identify. A few children recognized that the girl was a little like Alice in Wonderland, who fell asleep and followed the white rabbit. The illustrations were

very detailed, so the children spent quite a bit of time examining them and recalling stories that they had read.

After examining the illustrations we looked at the print. One child commented that the letters were more like English than the Bulgarian alphabet. He also noticed some of the accent marks over the letters. We didn't find many words that looked like English, but we noticed that all of the words had at least one vowel.

During the second session the students were shown a French story, Nuage, Le Petit Mouton. This is a story about a lamb who is looking for her voice. The lamb wanders around the farm asking the other animals if they have her voice. We first looked at the illustrations of the different farm animals. After telling them a little more about the story, they made the connection between this story and a story that they had read before entitled Are You My Mother? In both stories an animal asks for help in finding something.

When the children examined the text, they noticed the similarity between letters in English and French. They also noted the question marks and quotations in print, so they could tell that someone was asking a question. Susan tried to pronounce some of the words and discovered that some of the spellings of the sounds the animals make; such as "meuh" for the cow, were similar.

We then looked at the traditional folk tale Les Trois Petits Cochons. The French version of The Three Little Pigs was very

similar. The children could tell immediately by the pictures that it was The Three Little Pigs. They enjoyed looking at the illustrations and relating the story. The children were also able to find more words that they could pick out from the context and the illustrations. They were fascinated with the similarities and differences in the pictures. The three pigs looked the same, but the wolf was different with his gold trench coat and dressy hat. Several children began to pick out words that were repeated throughout the story and tried to translate them.

During the third session, a story in German was examined. The children didn't talk quite as much about Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten (The Bremer City Musicians) because only one child in one of the groups had read the story in English. We told our own story using the illustrations and then looked at the language. The students found a few words such as "Musiker" and "Gitarre" which are very similar to the English words. By this time they were really aware of print characteristics and were making comparisons. The use of capital letters, punctuation, and sentence structure was discussed. It probably would have been helpful to share the German alphabet at this time.

During the last session we examined books that were written in two languages. The children were particularly intrigued by a Japanese book Chiisana, Chiisana Hebi (The Little Bitty Snake). Since it was a bilingual edition, we were able to read the story together. Also they were surprised to see the picture of the

author, a nine year old boy. The children are in the process of writing and "publishing" their books, so this was particularly interesting for them. We read the title in English. Then we tried to pronounce the words in Japanese. The English pronunciation was written under the characters. One child said "I bet that this says snake." We noticed that little and bitty are both written the same in Japanese and decided that they probably don't have a separate word for bitty. This showed a basic understanding of the difficulty in translating from one language to another.

As we read the bilingual version, several children tried to pick out other words in Japanese. They quickly noticed when one character was repeated on the next page. One child said that the characters look like drawings. John said that they would be easy to make but not everyone agreed with him. They were all interested in this different way to write. The concept of print as another way to depict objects was very evident here.

Probably the book that interested the children the most was the legend The Woman Who Outshone the Sun. This is another bilingual book, written in Spanish and English. The children had been studying legends and were interested in the concept of passing down stories from generation to generation. This legend had been passed down by the Zapotec Indians and was finally recorded. It was beautifully retold and the illustrations were colourful and appropriate.

The legend tells about a woman with beautiful hair who comes to the village. When she goes to the river, the river begins to flow through her hair. After she bathes, she combs the water and the fish out of her hair. The villagers are afraid of her powers, so they drive her from the village. The river goes with her. Finally the villagers beg her to return the river. At last she returns the river but reminds them that they must treat everyone with kindness, even those who are different.

One group of children wanted to take turns reading the story in English. We read the story and looked for similar words in Spanish. In another group one of the boys had spent a year in Mexico. Jason said that he had learned to speak and read some words in Spanish. He proceeded to read the Spanish version. All of the students were impressed by this story and several of the students wanted to know where you can get books written in two different languages.

Motivational Uses

Today we talk about using literature to teach children how to read and the importance of instilling a love of reading when they are young. Laughlin and Swisher (1990) tell us that including literature that is relevant and significant motivates children. But literature from other countries can also provide a highly motivational and meaningful activity if teachers take the time to help students relate the stories to the children's own lives.

Legends and folktales are an excellent way to introduce children to another culture or language. Many children's books today are written in both English and another language. Some of these folktales are much like stories that children have already heard. Children are quick to point out both the similarities and the differences, and they enjoy doing this.

Children also like to look at the art work. Even though the story may be in a different language, they can often tell the story using the illustrations. It is interesting and enlightening to study the different types of art work from other countries. Teachers of young children often point out the illustrator's style in English language books. This can easily be extended to books from other countries.

Teaching Strategies

Zabel (1991) stresses that stories written in the native language and told in English can be a link for those learning English. It is also a good way for all students to increase their vocabulary.

Publishers in the United States are becoming more aware of the need for children's books that are written in other languages. Camarata (1991) says that books are now available in languages from Arabic to Punjabi, from Hebrew to Farsi, from Cambodian-Khmer to Ukranian. Many of these books for young children are also bilingual.

Boutte and McCormick (1992) discuss the importance of informal rather than formal lessons. Children must be given

opportunities to explore similarities as well as differences in other cultures (Byram, 1988). Picture books are one way for children to study other cultures. They can examine the illustrations in books from different countries to see that artists the world over use color, line and design to depict people, objects and feelings.

It is important and beneficial to have good books in other languages for all children, not just those who speak a foreign language. Offering children the opportunity to "play" with other languages gives them a better understanding of what language entails (Spolsky, 1989).

Discovering similarities and differences in other languages will also make children aware of other cultures (Byram and Morgan, 1994). Exposing children to folktales and legends from other countries can be one way to stimulate interest and curiosity about people. Tway (1989) maintains that multicultural literature in the classroom is essential. It meets the needs of students and helps them to grow in understanding of themselves and others.

Young children are curious about other languages. Teachers can readily expand on this interest. They can help children to discover folktales, fables, myths, and legends that clarify values and beliefs. "When involved in cross-cultural comparisons students can read numerous adaptations of story types found in various cultures and compare the similarities and differences across cultures" (Norton, 1991, p. 288). Students can see that

although some things are different in other cultures, many are the same, and all people have their own stories.

Conclusions

This study, a small piece of action research, is based on limited observations of the use of children's literature from other countries. The children in this second grade class were definitely interested and enthusiasm for the project was high. This was a short-term activity, but it could be expanded into a long-term multicultural unit. Using stories in other languages is a fascinating way for children to gain a better understanding of language as well as other cultures.

By utilizing books that are written in more than one language, the classroom teacher can give children opportunities to be exposed to a second language in an enjoyable and familiar setting. Children can see some of their favorite stories written in two languages. They can compare similarities and differences. If the teacher doesn't speak the foreign language fluently, audio tapes can be used or guest speakers can come in to read stories.

Literature is an excellent way to involve children in learning more about languages and culture. Children enjoy listening to stories. Teachers can motivate students by appealing to their curiosity and sense of adventure. They can use literature to introduce children to a second language and to enhance learning.

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